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ABSTRACT

The Central European countries are currently in transition in all sectors. In education, the greatest challenge is providing sufficient English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction to meet the expanding demand, particularly after many years in which English was not taught widely in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. High pedagogical standards are being challenged by serious shortages of well-trained ESL teachers and materials. In some cases, teachers weak in English language skills or lacking language teacher training are being hired to fill the gaps. Native English-speaking English language training professionals can make a substantial contribution during this time of expansion, but collaboration with local experts will be important to ensure that the methodologies and materials that are developed are appropriate to local cultures and expectations. There are many challenges and difficulties to overcome. Response to these needs in the next few years will lay the groundwork for the future of English language development in the region. (MSE)

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Teaching English in Central Europe

By Mary Schleppegrell

> "In the '50s and '60s, headmasters here would stand up and say proudly, 'There is not English at my school'" (reported by a university professor in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1990).

Times have changed in Central Europe. Along with economic and political changes have come changes in the educational system. In particular, the need for English language instruction to meet overwhelming demand at all levels of education is challenging the governments to provide large numbers of English teachers while at the same time maintaining the high quality of instruction expected by Central European students. While the importance of English teaching is now clear to all, the historical legacy of the many years when English was not taught widely in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia has left these countries with insufficient numbers of teachers and inadequate supplies of materials and texts. Training new teachers, designing new programs, and making effective use of native English-speaking teachers are some of the issues they face in developing English language teaching.

BACKGROUND

A description of the state of English teaching in Central Europe must be prefaced by the comment that the education sector is currently undergoing a dramatic transition. New school laws are being debated, programs are being re-designed, and new priorities are being set, with educators at all levels responding

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to pressures for educational reform. There are few commonalities even within each country, and change is occurring everywhere. For that reason the descriptions here should be taken as representative rather than definitive.

English has never been widely taught in Central Europe, and for more than 40 years Russian was a compulsory subject and the only foreign language that was widely available in the schools.[1] With the changes in the governments of Central Europe that occurred in 1989-90, compulsory Russian instruction was abolished, and students were able to choose the foreign language they wanted to learn. An overwhelming number of students began demanding English courses, and sixty to eighty percent of students in the region are now selecting English as their first choice for foreign language learning. This has created enormous pressures on the educational systems to provide English teachers.

Ministries of Education were unprepared to meet this sudden demand. The countries had insufficient numbers of English teachers and inadequate capacity to train more teachers quickly. Only three universities and two teacher training colleges in Hungary had English departments in the late 1970s, according to Kontra (1981). In 1986 in Poland, nine universities had English departments, but only two teacher training colleges prepared English teachers (British Council 1986a). In Czechoslovakia, as of November, 1989, only 70 (1.6 percent) of the 4500 primary schools serving 800,000 students in grades 5-8 offered

instruction in English. Of the 400,000 students in secondary school, only 16 percent had the opportunity to learn a language other than Russian.[2]

For the Central European Ministries of Education, providing English language instruction is a major priority for the coming years. The need in Czechoslovakia, as articulated by the Czech Ministry of Education in the spring of 1990, was for 10,000 elementary and secondary foreign language teachers, hundreds of thousands of textbooks, and dozens of university-level English teachers. Similar figures are reported from Ministries of Education in Hungary and Poland.

Central Europeans view language instruction not only as an opportunity to learn a language, but also as an opportunity to learn about and understand other cultures. Students are eager for interaction with native speakers of English and for information about countries with which they have been out of touch for 40 years. Central Europeans also believe that improved knowledge of English will provide access to technology and to broader knowledge of the world. Since most scientific and technical information is published in English, knowledge of English will make an important contribution to further development.

ENGLISH EDUCATION IN CENTRAL EUROPE

English is taught at all levels in Central Europe: at primary, secondary and post-secondary schools, and in courses for

adults. English teachers are trained at universities and teacher training colleges.

English in the school curriculum

Children attend eight years of primary school, from ages 6-14. At the end of grade 8, children take entrance exams to attend one of two types of secondary schools, the gimnazium or a vocational secondary school. Approximately 50 percent of the age group do not attend secondary school, but instead enter three- to four-year apprenticeship programs.

The gimnazia are four-year programs which prepare students for the university. About 20 percent of the age group attend gimnazia. Vocational secondary schools, attended by about 30% of the age group, are four-year programs which lead either to post-secondary schools or to technical positions in the workplace. At the end of secondary school, students take an exam which qualifies them for post-secondary education at universities, technical colleges, or teacher training colleges.

Recognizing the importance of early learning of foreign languages, the Central European governments would like to make English available for all students beginning in grades three or five. Currently, English instruction begins in primary school for only a small percentage of students. Where English classes are available, primary school children are selected for participation on the basis of their native language skills and general intelligence. These children then receive about three hours per week of English instruction in grade three, and three

to five hours per week in grades four through eight. Where English teachers are available, children not selected through this process may receive two hours of English per week beginning at grade four, and three hours per week in grades five through eight.

At vocational secondary schools, English may be available for programs in tourism or other fields where English is a necessary part of the curriculum, but it has been less available for other vocational secondary school students. English instruction has typically been available for students in the gimnazia, where it consists of three to five 45-minute sessions per week.

At the post-secondary level, students can major in English at the Philosophical (Arts) Faculty of a university, where they focus primarily on literature or linguistics, or at a Pedagogical Faculty (teacher training college), where they are trained as English teachers. Students who are not majoring in English can take English courses through the foreign language departments. All university students study two foreign languages, regardless of their majors.

English may also be offered at "Language Schools" in the community. These offer classes in the afternoons and evenings to students of all ages who pay for two 90-minute sessions per week. Teachers generally use materials from the gimnazia.

Standard examinations have been used in the past as qualification for some jobs. The state examination in Hungary

for elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels consists of written (multiple choice, grammar, and translation) and oral (listening and interview) components. Success on this exam is needed for some jobs that require language proficiency. The state exam in Czechoslovakia includes written and oral components consisting of answering questions about or summarizing a text, answering questions about the culture of English-speaking countries, discussing a book, dictation, translation, and a two-page essay on a chosen theme. On passing this exam, students receive a state certificate which enables them to get promotions or other jobs.

English teacher training

At this time teacher preparation programs are being reviewed and revised in all three Central European countries. Currently Philosophical Faculties of universities train future gimnazium teachers, and Pedagogical Faculties prepare prospective primary and vocational secondary school teachers. Entrance requirements for these programs include satisfactory performance on the school-leaving exam and an oral exam in English. Students major in two subject areas. A five-year degree with a double major has been required for gimnazium teachers, and a four year degree with a double major has been required for primary and vocational secondary school teachers. Three year programs for lower primary grade teachers have also existed in the past in some areas. Currently some three-year programs with one major (English) are

being developed in order to prepare a large number of English teachers more quickly.

Previously, only a few Pedagogical Faculties offered English teacher training programs. Now, however, new centers for English teacher training have opened all over Central Europe. In Brno, Czechoslovakia, for example, the Pedagogical Faculty had not graduated any English teachers since 1977, but began a training program in September, 1990, with 45 students of English. Many new English teacher training programs were opened in 1991 in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary.

A report on the syllabus for preparation of English teachers in Hungary in the 1970s describes three major elements: literature, linguistics, and language skills development courses. Students also completed a two-semester course on methods and practice teaching, including 12-20 periods of actual teaching and 50-60 observations of other trainees (Kontra 1981).

The syllabus for English teacher training at the Philosophical and Pedagogical Faculties in Czechoslovakia in 1990 included the following courses:

Introduction to the study of English
Phonetics/phonology
Morphology
Syntax
Lexicology
Stylistics (study of various written genres and practice in written expression)
Introduction to literature
English literature
American literature
Practical language skills development
History of the English language
History of Great Britain and the United States

The focus is primarily on linguistics and literature, with limited opportunities for students to improve their listening and speaking skills through two to four 40-minute conversation classes per week, with about 12 students per class. Faculty typically teach about 15-19 hours per week. In the third year of their studies students have classes in pedagogy and supervised practice teaching at primary and secondary schools. Exams are written by the faculty at each institution.

A similar mix of courses was reported in Poland in the mid-1980s, with students spending about one-third of their class time developing English language skills, and the rest of the time on literature, linguistics, and the culture/history of English-speaking countries (Muchisky 1985).

English secondary school teachers in Central Europe teach about 20 hours per week. The high respect with which language teaching is held is reflected in the fact that although class size for other courses is typically 24-30 students, foreign language classes are divided in half so that the English teacher has 12-15 students per class. (Larger English language classes at the secondary level are reported for Poland in Muchisky 1985, however).

After becoming certified, a teacher in Czechoslovakia works for two years as a "beginning teacher," and is supervised by a methodologist from a regional pedagogical institute. These institutes provide ongoing teacher development assistance in methodology and language skills to English and other foreign

language teachers in primary and secondary schools throughout the country. Seminars and workshops are held several times per year, and summer intensive English courses serve a small number of teachers each year. The regional pedagogical institutes were in the process of being converted administratively in 1990-91, and their in-service training function may be assumed by colleges or universities in the future.

ISSUES IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

The education systems of Central Europe are highly developed, with students in those countries scoring at top world levels in science and mathematics. English language education is an underdeveloped sector, but the generally high level of professionalism in education means that parents and students expect that the new English teaching programs being implemented throughout the region will be of high quality and will provide students with opportunities to attain advanced levels of English proficiency.

Several issues face the Central European Ministries of Education as they strive to maintain high standards while responding to this demand. They face the need to train a large number of English teachers in a very short time. Curricula and materials are in short supply. Finally, many native speakers of English are taking jobs to fill the teaching gaps in the region. The role that they can play in the development of English language teaching needs to be clarified and coordinated through collaboration with local ELT professionals.

Supplying English teachers

There are not enough qualified English teachers to meet the current demand. In facing this problem, Central European Ministries of Education are confronted with two possible sources of immediate supply--former Russian language teachers, and untrained native speakers of English. Both groups present problems as a source of response to the need for English teachers.

At the same time the Central European countries face a shortage of English teachers, they have an oversupply of Russian language teachers. The abolition of compulsory Russian classes in the schools has created a situation in which there is currently little demand for Russian, leaving thousands of Russian teachers without work. Many of these want to be re-trained as English teachers to meet the tremendous need for English education.

Although the former Russian teachers are already trained in language teaching methodology, they will clearly require several years of intensive language study to gain the proficiency they need to teach English. Major efforts are being made throughout the region to provide this training. In Hungary, for example, a well-known European English teaching contractor conducts a 600 hour program of intensive English for 400 Russian language teachers throughout the country. Teachers study for 8-11 hours per week during the school year, with more intensive courses held during the summer vacations. Courses are also offered by teacher

training colleges and in-service training institutions under the Ministry of Education. These courses are typically designed for teachers with some English language proficiency who are already trained in language teaching methodologies.

The demand for Russian teacher re-training courses is overwhelming. One teacher training college in Czechoslovakia, at Hradec Kralove, had 470 applications from Russian teachers who wanted to study to re-qualify as English teachers in 1990. They expected 60-70 of these to pass an examination which would admit them to the English teacher training program. So although many of these Russian language teachers will eventually help fill the English teaching gap, their retraining is a long-term process which contributes to the current need for English teachers in the region.

Another potential source of supply of English teachers comes from the hundreds of native speakers of English currently moving into the region. Many of these native speakers, although untrained in linguistics and language pedagogy, are assuming teaching jobs. Because they are native speakers, many schools are willing to hire them as English teachers. But with no professional background or experience to draw on, many of them structure their classes around the question "What shall we talk about today?" While local ELT professionals appreciate the well-meant intentions of these native speakers, they stress that only well-trained and experienced teachers can help them to successfully meet the urgent needs they face.

In the meantime, however, parents are pressuring schools to provide English instruction beginning at the primary level, and for many principals it is tempting to respond by hiring either Russian teachers with rudimentary English skills or native speakers with no background in pedagogy or methods. Language teaching professionals in these countries fear that these practices will lower the standard for English teaching. Training by non-English proficient teachers, or teachers weak in pedagogy and limited in classroom experience, may give a generation of young people a disadvantageous beginning in language learning. One professor at a teacher training college in Czechoslovakia lamented that it could take 10-20 years to overcome the effects of English teaching by poorly prepared teachers.

Inadequate teaching materials

All of the Central European countries currently lack high quality and sufficient quantity of instructional materials for teaching English. Although texts in Poland were reported to meet a high standard in 1986 (British Council 1986a), and a new curriculum was recently introduced in Czechoslovakia (Repka 1986), lack of texts and materials or poor or outdated materials is consistently reported to be one of the biggest challenges in teaching English in these countries. There is currently no single text which are promoted by any of the Ministries of Education, and a great deal of experimentation with a variety of materials is occurring throughout the region, with the same school sometimes using up to four or five different texts.

In a 1990 survey of 27 primary and secondary school English teachers representing all regions of Czechoslovakia, all reported a need for more textbooks and for more up-to-date texts (Peace Corps 1990). Language teaching hardware was generally available, with all teachers reporting that they had tape recorders and overhead projectors at their schools, and 65 percent reporting that they had language labs and video recorders. Photocopy machines and other duplicating equipment was generally unavailable, however, and materials such as audio and video tapes and professional journals were the most common requests of these teachers.

Lack of materials does not necessarily mean outdated approaches, however. The teaching methodologies in the region have generally kept pace with recent developments in the field, although, as in every country, actual implementation of new methods varies considerably by region and teacher. A report on English teaching in Czechoslovakia in 1986 characterized the approach that was used at that time as predominantly communicative, with elements of audio-lingual and cognitive methods (Repka 1986). Other reports from the region also indicate that communicative methodologies are being used (Butler 1990, Nizegorodcew 1987). In the survey described above, teachers considered dialogues, role plays, and games the most valuable activities for learning English, and translation the least valuable. Many teachers (56 percent) reported that they had attended in-service training on teaching speaking and using

communicative activities, while most (85 percent) said they would like to improve their ability to teach speaking, use communicative activities, and use new methods.

Benefitting from native English-speaking ELT professionals

Many well-qualified EFL professionals who are native speakers of English are currently teaching in Central Europe through programs sponsored by private and governmental organizations. These teachers can make a major contribution in Central Europe during the transition period of the next few years, until these nations have trained enough local teachers to meet the demand. The native speaking ELT professional can introduce new methods, provide opportunities for local teachers to improve their proficiency in English, and present democratic models of student-teacher interaction, helping students to learn to think critically, debate issues, and make decisions.

In order to be most effective, however, native-speaking EFL professionals need to work together with local EFL professionals so that the recommendations that are made and the programs that are implemented are appropriate for the region. Techniques and approaches that work in English as a Second Language environments such as the United States and Britain will not suit the needs of students in the English as a Foreign Language context of Central Europe.

Anna Nizegorodcew (1987), for example, criticizes the adoption of role-playing exercises that cast students in inappropriate roles, or roles that they will never be called on

to play in real life. She suggests that exercises taken from texts designed for use in English-speaking countries need to be re-cast for students in an EFL context. The role-play activities that she has developed, for example, cast Polish students in the role of a Polish speaker interacting with English native speakers who are visiting Poland. This is a scenario which is potentially real for the students. She cautions against using topics that refer to an unfamiliar reality, or that put students in a position of arguing for or against something for which there is really no choice in their situation.

Local teachers may also have difficulty implementing techniques that are linguistically demanding. Peter Medgyes has pointed out that the theory of the communicative method is sound, but putting it into practice can be exhausting. He notes that audio-lingual methods require only focus on speed and correctness in production of grammatical structures, while communicative teachers must focus on meaning and form, which is very challenging for the non-native speaker (Medgyes 1986). Audio-lingual or grammar-translation methodologies are more readily implemented by teachers who lack advanced English proficiency.

Recommendations made by native English-speaking ELT professionals will have an impact only if they are sensitive to local conditions. Medgyes suggests that the non-native speaking teacher should filter the ideas that come from native speakers. Local EFL teachers can ensure that the suggestions made by native English-speaking EFL professionals suit the cultural and

educational expectations of the students, which may be different from those to which the native English-speaking teacher is accustomed. Local EFL professionals can provide leadership in the formulation of recommendations for implementing new materials or methods.

SUMMARY

The Central European countries are currently in transition in all sectors. In education the greatest challenge is providing sufficient English language instruction to meet the expanding demand. High pedagogical standards are being challenged by serious shortages of well-trained EFL teachers and materials. In some cases, teachers weak in English language skills or lacking language teacher training are being hired to fill the gaps. Native English-speaking ELT professionals can make a substantial contribution during this time of expansion, but collaboration with local experts will be important to ensure that the methodologies and materials that are developed are appropriate to local cultures and expectations. There are many challenges and many difficulties to overcome. The response to these needs over the next few years will lay the groundwork for the future of English language development in the region.

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NOTES

1. See British Council (1986a, 1986b, and 1987) for profiles of English teaching in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia before the changes in 1989-90.

2. Information in this article about Czechoslovakia was gathered in interviews with Ministry of Education personnel in the Czech and Slovak Republics during April, 1990.

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